

Celebrity critic blasts our bloated urban government

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Bravo to Richard Florida. In his essay in last Saturday's Gazette, on how to energize Montreal, the well-known urban-affairs expert made a point that needs all the attention it can get. He said that the Montreal region's lumbering government structures are holding the region back. He cited them as one cause of Montreal's oft-cited immobilisme.

It's not a new insight. Other eminently qualified observers have also found the region to be wildly over-governed. Yet neither municipal nor provincial politicians have ever refuted the critique, much less tried to. They have simply ignored it.

Florida's opinion adds weight to the critique. The University of Toronto professor is the best-selling author of books on what makes successful cities tick containing some of the freshest insights since Jane Jacobs. He studied Montreal extensively several years ago, when still teaching at Pittsburgh's Carnegie Mellon University.

In his essay, which kicked off The Gazette's Challenge Montreal series that will continue this Saturday, Florida also identifies as major problems the weak education system, the crumbling infrastructure, and linguistic and cultural tensions as major problems. But he devotes special attention to the challenge posed by "overbearing" government.

He finds that the region's government structures are "fragmented and filled with contradictions - complicated and clumsy. Hardly anyone who isn't involved full-time can understand them."

Florida says that Montreal is typical of many major North American cities in this regard. He's too kind. In fact, no other city has so four layers of local government - especially four fat layers. Montreal has a city council (with 64 councillors, more than any other cit), a layer of boroughs (which have an additional 40 councillors), a higher body called the agglomeration council that allows the city to interact with Montreal Island's suburbs and, finally, a regional body called the Communauté métropolitaine de Montréal with big responsibilities on paper but few achievements.

And that's just the beginning. The off-island suburbs are clustered into a dozen municipalités régionales de comté (MRCs) - created by the Lévesque government to serve as French-style départements in the event of sovereignty, yet still hanging on. The MRCs are now waging a turf war with the Communauté métropolitaine de Montréal, a spat that is delaying the CMM's plan against urban sprawl.

Oh, and if you're not dazed enough, consider that the Quebec government has also split the metropolitan region into five "administrative regions," each with its own grandees and economic-development plan.

I'm a liberal. I believe that government has a big role to play in co-ordinating

society's energies. But this is ridiculous.

It's not Big Government. It's ubiquitous petty government.

And it's one reason for the immobilisme that Florida trenchantly defines as "the tendency for nothing significant to happen because governments, business, social groups and unions are so at odds and so stuck in their ways that no one can provide clear direction."

I said earlier that Florida is not alone in making such a criticism. In 2004, one of the world's most respected research outfits, the Paris-based Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, studied the Montreal region and found that it ranked dead last among all North American metropolitan regions as measured by gross domestic product. The OECD concluded that one reason for this was the region's "tangled muddle of institutions." A harsh verdict.

Why do municipal politicians ignore such insights? Why, you ask, don't they press the Quebec government (which alone has the power to act) to redesign local government, simplify it and bring decision-making closer to the public?

One reason is that the structure issue is arcane and rarely discussed, so there is zero public pressure for reform. Another reason is that, once elected, local politicians become part of this cozy, undemanding system. They jostle to get named to committees within the system - well-paid appointments with little work. So what if little gets done?

By law, Montreal's mayor not only dominates city council but also presides over the agglomeration council and the CMM. Now that Florida has raised this issue of "complicated and clumsy" government, I'd like to see the candidates for Montreal's 2009 mayoralty election - Benoît Labonté, Richard Bergeron and especially the incumbent, Gérald Tremblay - say what they'd do about this absurdity.

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